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ABSTRACT

Modern drama criticism is rebuked for taking the "closet drama approach" which reduces the theater to yet another type of philosophical and content-oriented literary genre. Group participation and discussion are suggested as means by which the student is encouraged to stage an imaginary performance leading to intelligibility and appreciation of the theatrical nature of drama. Special problems encountered by students in reading the drama are examined. (RL)

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TE 500 483

Modern Criticism and the Closet Drama Approach

James T. Nardin

In the years that I've been teaching drama, the commonest and most disheartening comment I've met with regularity is "I can't read a play." This comes from my students; it comes from my friends; it comes from my colleagues on occasion. And a good bit of the reason for this failure can be attributed to the kind of criticism we have been faced with in the drama—a criticism which in a sense apologizes for and tries to explain away the drama, or at least to treat it as if it were something else more respectable.

This is not strange. Drama has been suspect in the classroom for a long time, largely, I fear, because it is popular. We who teach tend to mistrust literature people like. Indeed, I doubt that drama would ever have made it into the classroom and the learned journals if it had not been for Shakespeare. His poetic genius was so great that he could not be ignored, and after all, the main body of his work was in dramatic form. So the play had to be reckoned with.

But it could be explained away as something else—as a philosophical discussion, as imaginative poetry, as imagery, as retreatment of earlier material. When I was an undergraduate, I had a course in Shakespeare, and because I took Greek and Latin, I also read some classical drama. But Greek drama was an exercise in translation; it was not the study of a play. The Shakespeare professor lectured on sources and indicated in the early plays the characters to be developed more fully later and then reminded us in the later plays that we had seen earlier Violas, Launcelots, and Iagos. So he devoted five lectures to *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and a total of three to *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Then along came Brooks and Warren with their new approach to teaching poetry and fiction, and this new approach was extended to the drama. More plays were introduced into the classroom, and that was all to the good. Also, the time in class was devoted largely to the text of the play instead of merely to Holinshed or Plutarch and the adaptation Shakespeare made of these sources.

But the orientation of that approach to the drama text was still fundamentally the approach to the poem, an approach to a piece of literature designed to be read by one person alone, to be analyzed closely in terms of imagery and philosophical content. It simply ignores the

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elements that make a play distinctive. It turns all plays into closet drama. And to make *Hamlet* or *Hedda Gabler* or *Oedipus Rex* closet drama is disastrous both critically and pedagogically.

After all, most of us did not get interested in closet drama to begin with, if, indeed, we ever got interested in it. We saw plays; we acted in them. Only after considerable experience with what plays looked like and sounded like were we able to read them and approximate a theatrical experience in our imaginations. But most modern criticism would lead us away from the theatrical phase of the drama and take it directly into the closet for careful scrutiny.

In *This Great Stage* (1947), his book on *King Lear*, Robert B. Heilman (and it is his text *Understanding Drama* which has been perhaps as influential as any single work on the direction recent teaching of the drama has taken) indicates this prejudice against the theatrical:

> But it seems safer to assume, as a working hypothesis, that, when there is repeated speculation upon nature, the play is to that extent an essay upon nature—an essay necessarily broken up into parts which are apportioned according to, and probably modified by, dramatic necessity.[1]

A decade later, in *Magic in the Web*, he is more strongly opposed to any but the closet study of the drama as poem:

> The printed play is somewhat like the symphonic score which the music critic, imagining the performance, may study rigorously to see how it is "composed." All this is hardly a new and bright idea, but it seems necessary to say it to counter an argument that keeps popping up—the Fallacy of the First Night or the Fallacy of the Single Reading. The victim of this fallacy can hardly believe that what the auditor would not get from the performance, or the reader from such a reading as he would accord to a relatively straight-forward work of prose, is not there, but he often talks as if this were true—as if, because he wrote for the theater, Shakespeare were restricted by capacities of the ordinary theater-goer (as conjectured by a twentieth-century scholar) . . . .[2]

These two passages seem to me to lay bare the heart of the problem of trying to make use of modern criticism in teaching drama. Though both imply that dramatic necessity and dramatic elements are involved, the idea of concentrating on what comes over in a theater before one explores any additional possibility is passed over by calling the "first-night" approach a fallacy and referring to those of us who like to begin there as "victims" of it. The emphasis on "reading" a play as it appears in these passages suggests that a reading and a viewing are the same thing. They are not.

Let me turn back briefly to these passages and to what seems to be fundamentally wrong in their approach. The reference to the play as a philosophical essay seems to me like the statement of teachers—and I have heard many—who start to deal with a short story by saying "Now the story is not important." They cut off what gets the reader interested in finding out what more may be offered. If the author chooses to write a story, he does so because he thinks he can embody his idea more forcefully in story form or because he thinks stories make more money than philosophical essays. In either event, it is important and a necessary starting point.

Similarly, if we tell the student that *Oedipus* and *Lear* are interesting because they both deal with a similar theme of paradoxical blindness and sight and that the play as play is not important, we are denying the very elements which make them distinctive and exciting works—that they are plays which embody ideas in a form designed to reach an audience in a theater and move that audience, that much of what moves us depends on what

[1] *This Great Stage*, p. 11.

[2] *Magic in the Web* (1956), p. 13.

we see and hear, and that the failure to consider these theatrical elements is to make these plays simply one more pair of long poems for private reading in the closet.

Professor Heilman's other statement which I have quoted about the play's being a symphonic score for study and analysis one finds echoed in many of the most recent texts of the drama. But the statement appears again to me to go at the play from the wrong end. Let me repeat his phrase again—"the printed play is somewhat like a symphonic score which the music critic, imagining the performance, may study rigorously to see how it is 'composed.'" True, but there is admittedly no purpose to analysis of a symphonic score if the reader does not imagine the performance. And the principal difficulty in imagining such a performance, most of us would readily admit, is "hearing" it. To do so from the printed score requires a great deal of experience with performed music. And only after acquaintance with performed music is one likely to be interested in finding out how the effects were created.

We who teach drama are, I hope, capable of "reading the score" of a play because we know a great deal about performed drama. But our interest in details of a "dramatic score" is an interest in seeing how the effects conveyed to us from the stage were achieved—textually, visually, audibly. Since we can reconstruct a performance mentally, we are ready for that kind of examination. But if we wish our students to be able to read drama as a distinctive literary genre, we had better begin, not by examining the details, but by helping them try to construct a performance of the play in their minds. So in examining details for ourselves, we need to keep in mind that, interesting though they may be in themselves when we examine the text of the play, the details that we can find but that virtually no one in the audience would detect in a performance without previous close study of the text are of no great significance to the student learning to overcome his inability to "read a play."

So let us turn to what the student finds his greatest problems in reading a play. The novel is designed to be read; the poem is designed to be read. Both can be taken in in solitude. The play is designed to be seen and heard by a group of people assembled in a theater (or more recently before a TV set). When the student picks up a play with speeches and character names and little else, he finds himself far more on his own that he is in the novel, where the author is in general more explicit in telling him what he is seeing and what he is hearing than the playwright is. The student who "can't read a play" often tells us he "can't keep the characters straight." If you can put him in the theater and expose him to the same text, he has no such trouble, for he has different persons and different voices to help him keep them straight.

I begin, therefore, to recreate a play for him in the classroom by trying to supply the auditory help he needs. With *Hedda Gabler*, for example, I assign (before I have asked the students to read the play) different parts to students in various parts of the room. Some read badly; others well. Admittedly, rehearsal would make this go better. But I want the students to see how as they start to read for themselves they are going to have to imagine a play. The results are often astonishing as they hear voices coming from different parts of the room. The students then report that it is easier to follow, that the play "makes sense."

Also, since *Hedda Gabler* depends a great deal more on the conversation than on the visible action, this play serves me very well. I have the students read the opening six or seven pages of the play and then stop them and begin discussion

of what they have gathered from that much of the play.

This fall when I tried it with a class, one person remarked that it seemed strange that as late as Hedda came in at night she still unpacked; but only one had noticed that detail. Several of them were aware that Berta seemed uneasy about her new job in this newly established household. All of them were aware that Hedda was a woman about whom they felt some misgivings; all of them felt that the honeymoon (and George) sounded stuffy and dull; everyone had recorded that Miss Tesman's hat was of some significance.

What this seems to me to illustrate—among other things—is that inevitably in a play, the attention span of the members of the audience varies and that the dramatist therefore emphasizes by the text things which he considers important for future development. Since the actors and the director will determine the speed with which lines go by the audience, the dramatist cannot risk having the audience get lost by missing a single mention of any one important detail. If he is not merely to repeat each line three times, he must find various kinds of details which will add up to the impression he wishes his audience to have. Since the audience cannot ask to have a line repeated, either repetition or theatrically staged emphasis are his only devices for making sure that an audience stays with him. The obscure and the esoteric are all right for the closet, but are not theatrical, as many a dramatist has learned to his pain. So should the teacher.

Having launched a class on *Hedda Gabler* in this fashion, I ask the students to read it through at a fairly rapid (and reasonably attentive) pace, trying to keep straight what the play would at least sound like. And with repeated exercises of this kind, I come to the point where I find the students can at least read a play and keep the characters straight.

Next I start on the problem of trying to get them to supply as they read, something of what they would see in a theater. Readers are notoriously fond of skipping descriptive passages; when descriptive passages appear as stage directions, they are almost invariably ignored by even the most determined of us. But we cannot ignore what we would see if we were looking at a stage, not if we are really going to read a play.

To start with, I point out that a stage description is intended for the director, not the spectator, that the details of the scene described in a modern play will be recorded by the spectator only after he has observed the total effect. Hence, if the play says "a drawing room at the present day," that is the general impression we get at once. And this initial impression indicates something of what to expect from the play. The students themselves are astonished to realize how conditioned they are by such a set to expect something other than tragedy, for example.

To be more specific, I like trying on them the description of the set for *You Can't Take It With You.* Here Kaufman and Hart have done much to indicate the amused shock we get initially and the added hilarity we feel at seeing first the cluttered living room of the Sycamore family, and then in rapid succession the details—painting easel, typewriter, printing press, fishtank full of snakes, etc. I ask them to try to visualize the scene for themselves and see the absurdity of the collection of incongruous things in that living room. If I ask them what from such a scene they expect the play to be like, they find they know almost at once. This is another step toward getting the student to read a play and stage his own imaginary performance, a most useful step if he is not to mistake a play for a closet drama.

Then I begin on the problem of combining the visual and the audible. I sometimes try staging (half in actuality, half in their imaginations) a scene; one from

Henry IV, Part I is a good one here—the scene in which Falstaff discovers the trick that has been worked on him by Poins and Hal in the highway robbery. I ask them just what they would have Falstaff do as stage action during the speeches of the other people. They need to see that Falstaff even while listening must give some suggestion of his gradual realization that he is caught and tricked and must by facial expression and glance indicate to an audience that he is on the verge of working a way out if they are to see why the scene is uproariously funny on the stage and to believe in Falstaff's ingenuity in the face of seeming disaster.

Of course, the ham in a good many of us makes it difficult for us to stand by while some of our inept students read a line badly or suggest nothing by way of illuminating action to accompany dialogue. And I see no reason why we should not occasionally step in to offer suggestions on the reading of a line and to point out what may happen if one shifts a meaning by reading. But since it is more important that we develop the ham in our students, we should do what we can to foster this instinct in them. And they have it.

To develop the ham in them, several times I have tried the line from *Henry IV, Part I*, where Falstaff and Hal play the roles of the King and Hal—Falstaff's line "I would your Grace would take me with you. Whom means your Grace?" If the students have been given a chance at offering suggestions about action and reading, they vie with one another in trying to read this line and to suggest the action that may accompany it.

After a good many attempts at exercises such as this, I find that when the students come to class after reading a play on their own, they have begun to stage mental productions, and sometimes they do not agree about the way things are done. At this point, we are ready for the kind of textual quarrels and quibbles that a good bit of modern criticism introduces, but still such discussion needs to be checked by a reference to what can be done from the stage. We may look at a line such as Ophelia's "I do not know, my lord, what I should think." The line may be simple; I think it is. But reading it differently may change Ophelia from an innocent and dull woman to a knowing minx. I have let people try reading it in various ways and then have pointed out to them that they must take a stand on what the line is to mean—in conjunction with the rest of Ophelia's characterization—and then read the line that way, that both extremes of this range of characterization cannot be simultaneously represented. So also with textual quibbles like "solid" or "sullied" flesh. Scholars may argue as long as they like over which word to use, but when the actor speaks the line, he will have to make up his mind, one way or the other, unless he is going to mumble like the Method Actors. On the other hand, Hamlet's "Ay, madam, it is common" can easily be read so that we hear in the theater more than one meaning to the word *common*. The final test is whether it can reasonably be played so that a spectator not versed thoroughly in the text in advance could detect the multiplicity of meaning that the closet-bound scholar has conjured up.

But the test of such readings is not limited to single lines in isolation. Examination of the subtle meanings of a text ought well to be done with the constant questions "What happens to this meaning in the theater?" "Could we make most of the audience register it?" "How would it be done?"

Let me illustrate with a line that had been lost on me until I saw the play performed. In *Volpone*, in the scene where the will is read by the greedy characters who have hoped to be Volpone's heirs—Voltore, Corvino, and Lady Politick-Would-Be, all read the will. Mosca sits making quiet inventory of the

estate. It is easy to picture the basic scene, with Volpone peering out from hiding watching with satisfaction the frustration of these characters. The absurdity of the frenzy of the disappointed heirs as contrasted with the excessive calm of Mosca is hilarious to watch. But the great moment is easy to pass over for the reader who does not picture the action. Corbaccio late in the scene says "Mosca the heir?" after it is clear to everyone else and has been for a long time that he is the heir. But on the stage, this business makes the laugh on his line the greatest of the show. He is old, nearly blind and deaf. All through the wild screaming of the others, he laboriously reads the will, arriving only later at the realization that he has been bilked. The fun the audience gets from the absurd lateness of his discovery is something only visualization and hearing the scene can supply. Perhaps most readers never reach this skill, but at least one director I know of did, and it should be our aim as teachers to get our students to go as far as they can toward seeing and hearing a stage play as they read. Even if they fall far short of the ideal, they will be able to read a play better than they do now.

One other error into which modern criticism readily falls could be averted if the critics kept in mind the possibilities of performance and worked toward having students constantly envision that performance while reading a play. The tendency to pursue an image or a phrase that recurs is common. Such pursuit may illuminate the psyche of the author, but little about the play. The fact that a character mentions a word in Act II will not make us remember that fact if he mentions it again in Act IV or V unless something on the stage makes us recall the earlier instance or get it fixed firmly in our memories in the beginning. When Falstaff makes his speech about honor, we do not hear the word *honor* again without overtones of his initial attack on it. When Shylock's words are hurled back at him in the trial in *The Merchant of Venice*, we can hardly forget them since they are recent and have received much emphasis. When in *Mary, Mary*, one of the characters remarks that dried apricots have always made him think of ears, the laughter is so hearty that when the heroine later lifts the lid on the dish of dried apricots and looks surprised at what is in it, we are prepared for her reply to the question as to what she thought they were. We know the word will be *ears*, and it is.

The devices by which words, phrases, concepts in a play are fixed in the minds of audiences are numerous, but they depend on the theatrical. Details need to have appeared recently enough for the spectator to recall them or to have been emphasized as Miss Tesman's hat is in *Hedda Gabler* or the incendiary probabilities are in *Ghosts*. Mere repetition in the text is not dramatically significant, unless there is some reasonable way of playing the drama so that audiences record that repetition and unless there is some reason for that repetition to figure importantly in the overall reaction to, and judgment of the play. Otherwise, our pet theories may make the part greater than the whole—bad dramaturgy as well as bad mathematics.

By the theatrical approach—the constant reminder of the relationship between the text and reasonable imagined performance—we may lead our students to see that finally the test of reading a line or working out a bit of stage business has to be connected with what we have decided the character is as a person and what the play argues about human beings and their relationships. We need to emphasize the fact that only through this combination of printed text, actions, and vocal inflection can the student legitimately arrive at something of the meaning of the play in so far as it is a philosophical essay in the guise of a play. And by helping the student read a play

in this theatrical fashion, we may get him at least to discover why the author wrote a play and not an essay—to be entertaining. After all, entertainment is what took us to the drama in the first place.

At this point, if we wish—and if we have time and energy enough left—we may be ready to begin the kind of "score study" the new critics recommend to see how the drama was "composed." But that is only for those of us who want to direct performances—on stage or in the class—and not for most of the drama readers we are trying to train, those whom we would have see that drama can be entertaining and can afford interesting reading and present an interesting idea.

I still, however, have one more device at the end of the consideration of a play. It may sound stupid, but it helps remind the students finally of the theatrical nature of a play. I find it a useful device for making them sum up in their own minds just what the essentials of a character are. I ask them to cast the play (and sometimes to miscast it as grossly as possible) using only well-known actors for the roles. They can't do it without deciding just what the characters are as people and appraising in some degree the ability of actors as they have known them. (Incidentally, it serves to keep you abreast of the theater as well, for actors have a way of fading from popularity, and if you are to control this part of the discussion you had better know something about who is acting what at the present moment.) But, flippant as it sounds, I felt I had in some measure succeeded in making a play a live theatrical event for a class recently, when one of the students said, "I think Elizabeth Taylor would be ideal for Gertrude. Then I could see how *Hamlet* got so disturbed at her behavior. If I were her son, I would be too." From the back of the room someone said, "In that case, I'd be Oedipus." The plays may have been out of focus after such remarks, but at least they were not dead issues on a page.

I realize that much of what I have said must stand on my own assertion. I have no text to support my contention, only my experience of trying to get students to see something of what makes drama exciting literature to me. I know it takes time to do this, and I know many of you worry that this time might be better spent getting at philosophical profundity. I know that energy spent this way won't create articles on the Aristotelianism of Blanche Dubois or increase the bibliography that we need for promotion. But I also suspect that there is enough ham in most of you that you have secretly and surreptitiously done these things and better, perhaps, and that in so far as you have gotten the drama out of the critical closet, you are closer to having a group of students who can read drama. If all we are doing in teaching is reflected in the preponderance of articles and books we see about drama, then any day now we ought to have an anthology appear consisting of Seneca's *Thyestes*, *Samson Agonistes*, *The Cenci*, *Paracelsus*, Swinburne's plays on Mary Queen of Scots, and *The Cocktail Party*—closet drama all. And that day I'll be ready to turn in my uniform, go to the showers, and join my students saying, "I can't read a play."

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